Jonathan — Best of luck! Richard

Out of Control in Colquitt

Swamp Gravy Makes Stone Soup

Richard Owen Geer

Day one the project nearly killed me. The big Cadillac was driving backroads from the Tallahassee airport to Colquitt, Georgia, past shanties, piney woods, and peanut fields. On a narrow strip of tarmac hemmed in by trees, Joy Jinks, my white, 50-something hostess, pulled around a log truck. The truck swung left blocking the Cadillac's path. Time opened like a door as my brain recorded the nanoseconds.

It is my fantasy that I did, indeed, die that day. So much of what I used to be as an artist is dead because of that trip. Since I came to Colquitt, I wonder if I am the same person.

Perfection is the reason for writing about this project. Not perfection in a sinless Southern Methodist sense, but perfection as chiaroscuro community process. I have the privilege of facilitating a semisegregated county of 6,000 in the agon of gathering its oral histories into a series of racially integrated plays presented in a huge site-specific performance and exhibition space. Ordinary people make the process; scores perform before friends and visitors, hundreds contribute stories or sweat, or both. Regional newspapers champion the project as an economic resource and catalyst for social change. The Georgia legislature read Swamp Gravy's humanistic goals into its record and proclaimed it the state's official folklife play. During the 1996 Olympics, as a designee of the Cultural Olympiad, Miller County will share its stories with the world.

More poignantly, more personally, over the four years of working with Colquitt, this Yankee has experienced communitas, bigotry, mystery, and genius. I've tasted rattlesnake and possum and partaken of the knowledge that the axe imparts to the one who chops. I've been blown away by the power of local knowledge speaking through the expert amateur voice in a performance of culture that is good, arguably great, theater.[1] I've seen individuals grow and a community cohere. I've had to invent words to talk about what's happened. More than anyone, I am sure it is me that has been changed by this encounter with *their* community. I owe them thanks. In these pages I try to bring the tale back to the theater campfire, to share it with the people of *my* community.

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> *"My dad used to fix swamp gravy," said Helen Griffin, owner of Pirate's Cove Restaurant, "when we didn't catch enough fish to feed everybody." Swamp gravy is a local tomato gravy made from whatever is available and cooked up in the crumblings and grease after the fish is fried. Most anything can go into it, always fish drippings, tomatoes, potatoes, and onions, sometimes shrimp, corn, or fish heads. Swamp Gravy is an appropriate moniker for a program designed to nourish community by mixing up whatever is on hand.*

The Process

Swamp Gravy is the name of an ongoing project and the series of community plays that come from it. It originated with a group of women in the local arts council in Colquitt, Georgia (pop. 2,000). I was a white, 42-year-old theater director and academician working on a doctorate in performance studies at Northwestern when I met Joy Jinks. Joy was looking for a way to help her community economically and spiritually. My experience as a director, teacher, and student of performance led me to believe that a large-scale, oral history–based play *of, by,* and *for* the community could do that.

Something needed to be done to help the town. "The community is slowly dying," a high school girl told me. "People get married and move off. Colquitt is dwindling down." Folks hoped that the play would "put Colquitt on the map."[2]

My goals were a little different. "We are pretending to do a play," I told the all-white arts council on my first visit to Colquitt, "but we are really doing something that, to understand, would take an order of intelligence that we don't possess" (Geer 1991). By engaging the community with itself, I hoped Colquitt could increase its wellness.

From the Georgia Humanities Council and a local foundation Swamp Gravy received a matching grant. With the money, humanities scholars, including myself, trained citizens in the process of oral history interviewing and transcribing. After this initial success, the project endured a long period, recently ended, of fruitless grant seeking. Swamp Gravy had no money, but it had a handful of true friends, like Joy Jinks. Day after day, meeting after meeting, call after call, Joy struck sparks, but failed to make a fire. She did not give up. Even after the first success, a low-budget production called *Swamp Gravy: Sketches* that was first performed in 1992, the viability of the project remained in question. Without foundation support, Karen Kimbrel, Libba Fudge, Jane Merritt, and Joy raised 70 thousand dollars from local sources to mount the first major production.

The notion that the performance of culture could animate the local economy seemed implausible to foundations and to residents. A crusty matriarch laughed in my face and with a wave of her arm told me the project was "way out." Behind my back she called me "the Yankee con man." Swamp Gravy, folks said, moved too fast, included too much, and interfered with other organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, whose job it is to promote the town. "To save my life I cannot see how Swamp Gravy will benefit this community financially," said outspoken 75-year-old Sue, a white woman married to a prominent retired doctor.

Vague associations, confusions, and contrary emotions clung to the project through the 15 months leading up to the *Swamp Gravy: Sketches.* "I kept hear-

1. Left to right: Darrius Haire, Doris Wilson, Ashley Holt, Ruby Holt, Lesley Clements, Joanna Richardson, and Kent Richardson in "Neighbors," a scene from Swamp Gravy, *Fall 1994. (Photo by Glenn Bair)*

ing [...] negative remarks," said one woman. "This would be true in any rural community," said another, defensively. Many people here "are born, bred, live, and die" without ever learning "what the world is all about," a man said. "When you are a closed community," a woman told me, "you are wary of anything." Wariness, another said, manifests as organizational turf guarding; "they want to hold back everybody, and success is seen as getting too big for your britches."

Outsider aesthetics versus the community's ownership was also an issue. I was convinced of the need to submit my artistic desires to the community's will, and Jo Carson, the playwright/adaptor, was used to working that way. Nonetheless, the resident collaborators were worried. Debra Calhoun Jones, managing editor of the *Miller County Liberal*, voiced the community's concern that we utilize its stories, and that we use these oral histories of blacks and whites, rich and poor in a way that would be acceptable.[3] I understood this to mean that the plays should not afford Jo and me opportunity to create scenes and stagings without regard for the town's stories. Tammy Spooner, a teacher turned homemaker, was concerned that the text and performance employ familiar symbols. Arts Council president Kay Chandler, her husband Don, Debra, and Tammy would not call themselves arts activists, but I found it interesting that without being told, they understood a significant aspect of community performance theory: that a town play could simultaneously uphold and subvert the dominant culture that sponsored it. These white arts council members wanted their town play to do more than celebrate, they wanted it to challenge.

The ability to skirt explosive confrontations yet deal with divisive issues and bring people together is the particular genius of community performance. It criticizes in the context of celebration. Baz Kershaw argues that such an approach is not only workable but optimal (1992). The local participants are the ones qualified to ratchet up or down the intensity of a play's content and context. Ordinary citizens understand how to balance a performance so it speaks effectively to their community, criticizing within a context of support. Outsiders can't know that.

"It's a real simple melody," Gayle said, "you can learn it first time." When cast member Gayle Grimsley sings, her voice draws every eye, ear, and heart to her. The children on the bus began to sing.

Gayle created Program Bounce in 1994 for at-risk youth in her African American community. "I've had dreams and ideas stored away in my head for years," Gayle told me, "but it was not until Swamp Gravy opened the doors that the dreams could come out." Her vision for Program Bounce (as in bounce back from at-risk situations) stems from personal experience. A generation ago she dropped out of high school, got pregnant, and was incarcerated. Now, through tutoring, outings, and, like Swamp Gravy, through the performance of personal stories, Gayle motivates youth to avoid her mis-steps.

Swamp Gravy volunteer Bill Grow of the Institute for Cultural Affairs, a national research, training, and development organization based in Chicago, helped find Department of Health funding for the program. With it Gayle hired Veronica Haire, another long-time Swamper. The mother of two boys, both Swamp Gravy performers, Veronica also has a personal stake in the program she administers. Several part-time staff round out the program, but Gayle is not one of them. "I didn't get a penny from this grant," she grins, "but I got all my dreams."

On a sunny day in April, Gayle, 47 youngsters, staff, and parents went on a field trip. "I wrote this song, and we were singing it," Gayle said. On the bus was a fifth-grade boy who was having problems at home and at school. According to Gayle, "nothing could reach him."

"Oh, new vision. Oh, new vision. Miller County, new vision," Gayle and the children sang.

"I looked around, and what do you think? Here was this little boy—singing. He has a voice!" Gayle realized.

"USA, new vision. All over this world, new vision. We are Miller County's new vision," he sang.

"We can reach him," Gayle Grimsley said, "through that voice, we can reach him."

The town feared "that trouble would be stirred up, old ghosts lurking down the hall, racial incidents," a mother told me. A local agricultural scientist agreed that bringing southern history to light would be a problem. Ann Jellicoe, who has done many large-scale local history plays in England, warns that a community can be ripped apart if the representation of its past is unkind—even if the unkindness is deserved (1987:124). I had made up my mind never to stage an unflattering depiction of an *identifiable* Miller County citizen, living or dead, but I was dedicated to listening deeply to what the town had to say about itself.

The process, to be meaningful, takes time. What we don't explore this season, may, next season, be ripe for inquiry. Take race relations, for instance. A local African American politician advises those who would work for racial justice in the south to "be patient, like Job" (Bush 1993). Ben Fuller, a white man of middle age whom I met on my first visit to Colquitt, told me that he had that morning finished planting black walnuts on a number of acres. "Black walnuts," he said, "do not bear for 50 years; nothing worth doing can be done in a lifetime." Five years into Swamp Gravy, in the summer of 1996, we plan to present the first scene of black/white difference. But that doesn't mean we haven't been working.

At the most basic level Swamp Gravy has listened. Hundreds of ears and thousands of hours were devoted to hearing the stories and engaging with

Being oral history–based means that the text of performance is authentic, that is, reflective of and coded in local knowledge. Multiply perspectival and ambiguous, oral histories are filled with a welter of community voices from the center to the edges. The phrase "oral history" is politically astute. It denotes living memory and connotes nostalgia and the conservation of tradition, but features the voices of those excluded from mainstream history. Also significant is why oral histories are remembered—because they are good stories. They are good because they are relevant. Dressing current concerns in old clothes (historical parallelism) creates an aesthetic or critical space between audience and issue. This space fills with the community's growing awareness.

them. In the subjunctive mood of performance, the process treated the storytellers, crew, volunteers, and performers "as if" they mattered. Listening is healing. Not only do we like people who listen to us, but we tend to like ourselves because, being listened to, we feel valued. This is intensified in areas like the rural South where the local cultural identity has been degraded. The positive effect of listening is intensified through the glamour and public occasion of performance.

While there were only a handful of full-length stories dramatized in the 1992 play, there were literally hundreds of phrases and saws that Jo sprinkled through the script. Sareen Coleman, an elderly African American who worked in Joy Jinks' home for nearly 40 years, proudly told me of the two or three anecdotes she recognized as hers. Sareen died in 1995. Another old woman, too proud to say how pleased she was, made mock protest of going to the play, but was delighted after seeing her story. Gayle Grimsley, an African American who played Sally Perkins Warren, told me that her great reward was "to see the look on [Sally's] face when she saw [her story] materializing as a play." Another informant told me of efforts to bring two elderly informants to the play together. Though their stories stood side by side, the elderly white man didn't want to ride in the same vehicle as the elderly black. "Even

2. Sally Perkins Warren (left) and Sara Ann Keaton. One of Sally's stories, recorded by Sara Ann, was used in "Ghosts," a scene from Swamp Gravy, *Spring 1994. Sara Ann also acted in the piece, performing herself as the interviewer at one point. (Photo by Glenn Bair)*

though we had to take separate cars," the interviewer sadly told me, "I never say never. Some people just have a longer way to go."

"Much to my surprise the play was quite successful and marvelous, and I was very impressed," an avowed white segregationist told me. This person voiced the hesitation that many had felt before *Swamp Gravy: Sketches*. Judging from the comments that preceded the first play there had been a great deal of doubt about the project, the leaders, and the whole notion that the past, featuring European and African Americans, could bring forth celebration.

Several of the remarks suggest that the plays, in some significant ways, alter the perception of the personal and public past. High school–aged Tonya told me that participants value more highly "what their grandparents have been telling them on the back step [...] so you can remember it and tell your kids."[4] "Things like the old wives' tales," became important, said Alice, a mother of four: "If you cut your hair on a certain phase of the moon, or hang a rattlesnake over the fence it will rain." "There is an education behind this," 70-year-old Christine said.

The plays make people appreciate where they come from, said B.A., a European American salesman. "A play like this wouldn't have been possible 20 or 30 years ago," a white instructor named Oliver told me. "The [racial] pain was too close." The play reinscribed history, Oliver said, removing some of its stigma:

> We can take a great deal of pride in the fact that other people also see our history as valid. Swamp Gravy has validated our history, said "yes, this history is important, yes, this history is precious. Yes, this history, whether you are black or white, we can talk about it, we can see it." I think it [the Swamp Gravy project] is going to eliminate pain—if it can continue—and replace [the pain] with understanding, with insight. So much of the hidden pain and resentment and anger that we don't know even what it was but it was passed down in impressions and moods against the other race. And a lot of times you inherit a feeling that was passed down from generation to generation, and you don't know why, what caused it.

Vince, a white 65-year-old cattleman, said "holding up black and white history and putting it into play form," eases the racial tension, "and the more it's done, the more the tension is eased, and the more we can accept each other." Oliver acknowledged that racial fears and images of racial violence are burned into peoples' memories: "What you need to know is that in spite of that we can start something new." Ava Mae, an African American performer, said, "All these years all this information has been happening," referring to the changing relations between the races, "and really nobody knew how anybody felt. Until the *Sketches* came along, nobody knew."

The race issue is perhaps the ultimate test for Swamp Gravy. During interviews after the first performance, Sue reminded me that I was not hearing the whole truth from interview subjects; Colquitt's blacks and whites do not always get along. "You are about to open a can of worms if you carry the black business too far," she warned. Another person cautioned that any racial mixing of a sexual nature, onstage or off, could result in disaster or death. Participation from African American performers has been proportional at 20 percent (the community is 80 percent white), but the audience attendance has been 95 percent white. Gayle Grimsley told me that African Americans hesitate to participate or attend because they are afraid of performance and of mixing with white people.

The Americans, African and European, who create the plays are, by contrast, partners. This partnership is palpable. It is, perhaps, the plays' dominant feature. "The people that have a part in this production, which numbers in

3. Swamp Gravy cast during a preperformance warmup in the firehouse across the street from Cotton Hall Theater in Colquitt, Georgia, Spring 1994. Doris Wilson and Don Chandler are in the center. (Photo by Richard Owen Geer)

the hundreds, have a respect for each other that was not possible before this started," wrote Terry Toole, publisher of the *Miller County Liberal* (1995). The performance context probably contributes more to social change than could the content of any scene. In the last two plays, for instance, black and white women and girls have spoken with a single voice on the issues of sexual and physical abuse. Later, when the community is ready to hear them, stories of racial difference will likely be told.

Betty, a white grandmother, said that the process brought people together who didn't know each other before, and bringing people together in heterogenous groups was important "especially for the adult population." B.A. used the word "bond": "It brings people together [...]. The further it goes, the more it will bond people in this community." According to Ed, a middle-aged white businessman, the Swamp Gravy project says, "'I don't care who you are, all I want is a commitment.' I don't see anyone checking birth certificates at the door." A mother whose twins act in the plays asked, "When could my twins ever work with a group this varied—different social, age, and race backgrounds?" The play builds individual friendships, too. Many, like Ava Mae, consider the "whole crew of Swamp Gravy as a family."

Community members, both inside and outside the production, further describe the Swamp Gravy dynamic. "In the first place," said an elderly African American woman not in the production, "swamp gravy is something you serve with fish." Referring to the project she continued:

> Its ingredients are fun, sincerity, action of people, which all put together makes up Swamp Gravy, just like onion, peas, okra [make up swamp gravy]. It is made up of ingredients of people. This is ingredients from

Community Performance Maxims

1. **Everyone who shows up is cast.** And everyone who wants a speaking role gets one. Skill comes with time. Community performance is not necessarily weakened by less-than-stellar acting. A performer may fail by critical standards and still make a contribution.
2. **All cast members need not attend all scheduled rehearsals or even all performances.** People routinely arrive late. Not once in the entire rehearsal or performance run was the entire cast present. To meet these challenges, short roles (from one to a dozen lines) are covered informally by others in the scene. Those taking larger roles are held to more stringent rules, and large roles are double cast.
3. **Community performance can be rehearsed more quickly than traditional Euro-American theater** because the actors perform their local knowledge. In traditional theater, a lot of rehearsal time is taken in discovering and setting the *zeitgeist* of a play. In community performance the *zeitgeist* is a given, what must be taught are performance skills. But that is easier than it seems because we are all performing all the time anyway. *Homo performans* has little trouble making the transition from life to the community performance stage.
4. **This is consensus art, not theater by committee or auteur.** No one is in control. Everyone must be comfortable with everything that goes on onstage. Paradoxically, this happens easily.
5. **Collaboration means everyone.** I've taken directing advice from a great-grandmother and innumerable children. Actors routinely give feedback to one another: "I couldn't understand that part," or "you're not in the light, come downstage a little more," or "hold still Tiffany, you're pulling the audience focus." If the collaboration gets too thick, if the cooks threaten to spoil the broth, it's appropriate to ask for simplification, to name the person whose help is required and ask the others to stop commenting. But this is rarely necessary.

> the community. You get people who have done strange things, funny things, and put it all together in the *Swamp Gravy* play.

Most comments focus on the performance as a social, rather than artistic, event. The community sees itself reflected, and it is about the community that people want to talk. Ava Mae said, "Oh man, it's really bringing Miller County out. A door is open that will help Colquitt in the future, it brings a great deal of pride." "The community has moved from disbelief to belief," said a European American named Joanne.

Community performance, of which Swamp Gravy is an example, is defined at the tensive interface between its constituent words. Community theater, a similar sounding term, is quite different. It alludes to a set of professional theater practices (having to do with texts, acting and production styles, and job hierarchies) accomplished within a largely volunteer organization. Community theater strives to be as professional as possible; community performance does not. It is a contemporary American revisioning of performance as practiced among tribal peoples. The writings of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner have contributed substantially to this revisioning. Swamp Gravy also builds on the work of a number of contemporary, first world, socially involved theater artists, such as Augusto Boal, Maryat Lee, and Ann Jellicoe.

Like Jellicoe's English productions, Swamp Gravy dresses itself in the past.

6. **Everyone has the power to save or ruin the show** because everyone is onstage all the time. Promenade staging drives home the truth that the individual is responsible for the group. Everybody makes a difference.
7. **Performances arise from an exchange of expertise for expertise.** Professional theater expertise offered by outsiders intersects the local knowledge of insider experts; performance is the turbulence at the confluence of these ways of knowing.
8. **This list is not exhaustive** and will change with each community.

4. *(Photo by Richard Owen Geer)*

The aesthetic distance created by a historical or quasi-historical look enables people to imbibe the multivocalities of text and context without being put on the spot. For both *Swamp Gravy: Sketches* and the more ambitious plays that followed we selected a general turn-of-the-century farm-family look. The first production had no professional costume supervision because there was no budget; all had to be gotten from the community. Fortunately several country churches hold annual "Old Timey" days for which women create pioneer-style costumes from commercial patterns. The set for the first production was simple, too; assembled rather than built, a combination of crates, bales, and sacks that was inexpensive and mobile.

The next production, *Swamp Gravy* (March 1994) was far more extensive and involved the renovation of an old cotton warehouse as a site-specific performance space. Colleen Muscha supervised costumes and augmented our slim supplies with loans from Florida State University where she is costume designer. The look she gave that production has become the Swamp Gravy standard. Perhaps 2,000 hours went into the conversion of the cotton warehouse as envisioned by Joe Varga, set designer. He created a promenade performing space where actors and audience stood together and an exhibit and concession area that featured sugar cane vats, moonshine stills, and displays of Mayhaw jelly, peanuts, and cotton. Joe was assisted by two local experts, artist Charlotte Phillips and interior decorator Maureen Cook, in locating props and set

5. & 6. The old cotton warehouse in Colquitt was renovated as a site-specific performance space for Swamp Gravy. Above: after initial cleanup, but before construction. (Photo by Joe Varga) Below: Swamp Gravy performance, Spring 1994. (Photo by Gwen Heller)

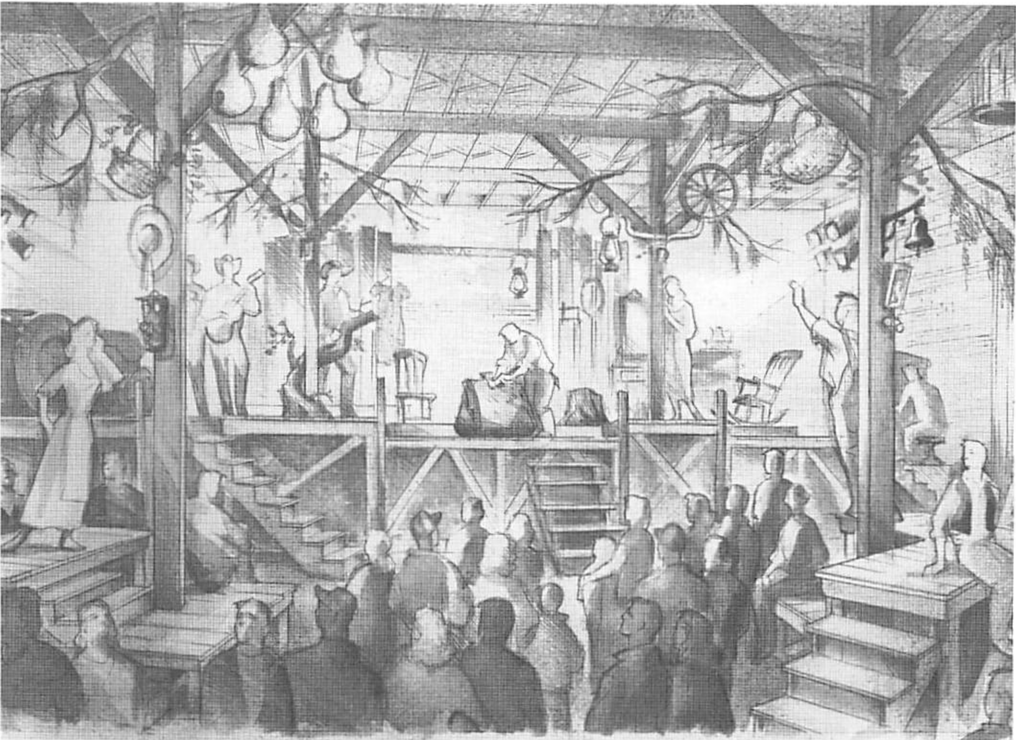
pieces that ranged from vintage vehicles (a 1930s tractor onstage and a secondary stage fashioned on the bed of an antique ton-and-a-half truck) to a live rooster and a dead fish.

The dimming of house lights draws the audience members from the exhibition and concession areas into the performance space. It is unique, yet familiar to the residents of Miller County. The heart of the performance area is a

Joe Varga, set designer: Looking back on this experience, I have rarely worked on a production where I and all involved became living participants in the central metaphor of the enterprise itself. Collectively we became the ingredients of Swamp Gravy. Granted, the theater customarily brings together many talents and skills, but in this case the mix came from a much wider vista of experience. The interface between theater professionals and indigenous community was perhaps the most fascinating and exhilarating aspect of working on the project. I had no idea what to expect, so I simply decided to perform my routine duties as a designer and treat everyone, whatever their level of experience might be, with the same trust that all of us in theater regularly bestow on each other. The payback certainly proved worthy of the trust.

So much of what we do in theater turns on the solving of problems. Interesting things happen when the trained professional mind meets the determined practical citizen. Creative problem solving gains a new breadth. Example: It seems that my design drafting initially met with some consternation, for it struck Karen Kimbrel, play coordinator, as quite daunting—something I found out only after the show was up and going. Exactly who and how was all this designed stuff going to happen? The solution was to bring in labor in the form of a group of inmates from a nearby prison. This was novel in my experience of scenery construction. It added one more dimension to the idea of community involvement. And of course it was quite successful, both as a process and in terms of accomplishing the task. Other citizens with carpentry skills also joined in, contributing time and work to put the physical production together. It most surely became "theater out of the community."

—*Joe Varga*



7. Set design by Joe Varga for a scene in the Spring 1994 season of Swamp Gravy.

square dirt floor, the pit. At one side is a stage, home base. Two small platforms stand on the dirt between home base and a diagonally parked flatbed truck. The truck marks the opposite edge of the dirt square and serves as a fourth stage. The platforms look like pens, fences, or scaffolds, and all the stages have been raised approximately five feet. The seating, on all sides but home base, is also raised to allow spectators to see over the standing participants (actors and audience) who mingle in the pit. Throughout the play actors climb the platforms to perform and then return to the floor. Continually the action moves out of and into the crowd.

Karen, in a turn-of-the-century dress, climbs the stairs to home base to begin the play. "You've got a story and I've got a story," she sings, "we've all got a story to tell." Veronica Haire tolls from across the room: "Oh, you've got a story and I've got a story, it's one we know so well." Others throughout the space continue: "You tell me yours/ And I'll tell you mine." Then, the whole cast from their positions among the standing spectators sings: "And we'll put 'em all together, and spice 'em all up./ And we'll have storytelling time" (Carson et al. 1994).

As the stories unfold, they are as well known to the audience as the actors, language, dialect, posture, and sense of humor. These elements enforce the play's authority and proclaim its local knowledge. When the play of thematically and emotionally related stories strung together with music draws to a close, the names of the departed storytellers and story characters are remembered in a candlelight scene. Walter Bilderback, dramaturg of Atlanta's Alliance Theater, wrote Karen that,

> The roll call and songs [...] commemorate and sanctify the historical experience of Colquitt and Miller County, placing it within a tapestry that includes the Vietnam Memorial in DC and the AIDS quilt. Anyone who witnesses *Swamp Gravy* (and my use of religious metaphors is intentional—no, unavoidable for a work of this power) gains a renewed sense of the miracle of being alive and the beauty of human community. (1994)

Through performance, diverse stories do become a powerful communal experience. An oceanic feeling drowns desire and judgment, and participants behold one another as suffering equals sharing the precious and mysterious gift of life. An altered community identity emerges from the process as does a bond among participants (actors and spect-actors). The integration of diverse people and stories results in a richly textured communitas—a rainbow of images in a single quilt.

Increasing diversity and integration sparks the creation of the hive mind we call "ensemble." Individual consciousness probably arose out of the necessity to integrate increasingly diverse organ systems (consciousness was, perhaps, an epiphenomenon of feedback loops reaching a certain density). In moments of challenge, as in performance, Swamp Gravy functions as an individual organism with a special intelligence. Elegant solutions to complex problems flow from the ensemble.

Two examples come quickly to mind. *Swamp Gravy: Sketches* had originally been scheduled to perform one weekend only, but its success created demand for further performances. This caused problems for many cast members who did not have time to remain in the show. They felt guilty about needing to drop out and resentful of the way in which the group pressured them to stay. All of this came to a head at a brush-up rehearsal one week before an out-of-town booking. Of the 54 performers, 37 felt they had to quit for the sake of their private lives. That would have left only 17 to do the show, too few we all thought. The emotional temperature in the room began to climb. I asked

Some Thoughts on Direct Address and Oral Histories in Performance

Jo Carson

I use direct address in all my work for the theater, not just the oral history plays like the ones for Swamp Gravy. By direct address, I mean when a character violates the fourth wall and speaks directly to an audience, in character, but without the pretense of an internal monolog. The actor is, in this context, for me, a storyteller; the actor herself is the storyteller—playing the character in scenes is just a part of the job description.

Storyteller is a loaded word these days because some folks have made a profession of the recitation of Jack tales, the Brothers Grimm stories, the coyote trickster stories, and the like, and do performances of these stories under the billing of storyteller. (You can even get a Master's degree in storytelling.) I do not mean to diminish the value of their contribution to the culture; these are often the only glance we have at archetypical underpinnings of who we are. But by claiming the title of storyteller, they have narrowed the scope of an honorable and very old idea, namely that storytelling is a function of being human, and not a skill given to a select few. In this older sense, storytelling is the keeping of the events of our individual lives (along with the assorted appropriate mythic underpinnings), and in the telling of these stories are the moments when we come to understand our relationship to those mythic underpinnings.

All this is to say that I am fascinated and compelled by the old idea of storyteller: I want to be one. And, like a cousin once removed, I am equally interested in characters who have stories they want to tell. As a playwright, I play a lot with direct address because I like the honesty of it and the hark back to the old idea of storyteller. (This is several layers of intent for an actor to struggle with in my work. Those who come from a tradition that uses narrative and storytelling—like the South or Appalachia—don't have much trouble with it; those who don't, want to know who the hell they are supposed to be talking to.) So, when I get to a project like Swamp Gravy, I hold a reverence for the value of real stories and have no qualms about putting a person onstage who is going to speak directly to his audience, knowing very well he is an actor playing a character and they are an audience who paid money to hear what he has to say. Brecht would probably approve.

Now, with that said, there is a problem with stories onstage: too much narrative equals no dramatic tension. If I am making a play from whole cloth, this is a problem I can address much more easily than when I am making a performance piece from oral histories. Stories can be an enrichment—layering with other material in a play made from whole cloth—and characters coming from a scene to a story carry some history and intent with them that I can use towards the whole. Not so easy with oral histories.

Writing performance pieces from oral histories is an exercise in frustration with three major problems: first, I am always confined by the material that has been collected in the oral histories whether I like it or not; second, it is all in first person narrative form and it is the kiss of

(continued)

death onstage to try to tell a story and act it out at the same time; and third, the material almost never revolves around a single story (like Anna Deavere Smith's work) that I can tell from beginning to end with however many different voices. I'm lucky if two stories in 500 pages of oral histories have to do with the same event.

So (first and third problems) the selection of stories I use from a set of oral histories has to have or be given some way to achieve a story (or theme) line and dramatic interest as a whole.

The first piece I wrote for Swamp Gravy, *Swamp Gravy: Sketches*, had a backbone about three major crops in the area (cotton, corn, and peanuts; all have been grown there a long time). The area is primarily farms and I had a lot of material that had to do with the work of making those crops; so I used it. In the latest piece, *Swamp Gravy: The Gospel Truth* (Spring 1995), the community had expressed an interest in doing a play about faith—coming to faith, trials of faith, that stuff. They collected oral histories that were relevant and one of them had a sentence or two about a revival preacher who had a specialty sermon on the ten commandments that needed ten dinner plates and a hammer to do: with each of the commandments, he would break a dinner plate and speak about what happened to the souls who broke that commandment. It was too good to leave alone so it became the backbone for that piece. I came out of the preacher's sermon with a story (from the oral histories) that either kept or broke a commandment—going through all ten of them. Some stories were better than others, some were just a line or two and I had to make details—but I can show you where I got all of them.

Another show, *Swamp Gravy: The Blue Doctor* (Spring 1994), had a lot of medical stories in the oral histories and I made a character from two of the doctors and used him and some of those stories as a through line for the play. It helps to think about this stuff in terms of Chaos Theory and the fractal images produced by chaos. The oral history material is the chaos and I choose a trunk story—like the ten commandments sermon—from the unpredictable order of it and make the branches of a tree with other stories; or I choose a current—like work—and come out of it in the patterns of turbulence with other stories like spinoffs.

With the second problem—the individual stories—I pull every trick out of the box and some from the air to make the individual stories something besides just another first-person narrative, however edited and tight it is. The tricks themselves are a book-length discussion, not a

two things of the group: that its members act respectfully and kindly with one another, and that no one leave until a solution could be found.

The facts of what happened are as simple as the results were amazing. The 17 decided that the rest could go with their blessings and with an open invitation to rejoin the production at any time. The 17 asked me if the play could be done by them. I said I didn't know. They decided that one way or another they would do it, and would spend whatever time necessary to accomplish that end. They broke into appreciative applause as those who wanted to leave departed the room. When they had gone, there were (amazingly) 34 people left. Apparently, releasing people from obligation empowered 17 more to choose to stay. In 15 minutes this group solved a difficult task that would ordinarily have fallen to the director: they recast the play, filling all the vacant roles. Everyone's needs were met, and all 54 continued to honor and support one another. The performance went off without a hitch.

sidebar, with director Richard Geer adding an assortment of his own when I run out of ideas.

What I am getting back to is the direct address I started with: it is almost all direct address; almost all of the material in the four shows I have written for Colquitt is direct address, because we have people as performers who live with storytelling (the old sense), and are extraordinary storyteller/performers of the sort the deep South grows, but who don't have much sense of themselves as actors. (There are a few notable exceptions to that blanket statement and I use those folks for scenes.) But most don't need to "act," if I can write the work right. So the cast is onstage in a very Brechtian construct: they are themselves, in costumes that suggest an older time, telling stories that come from other people—sometimes, when I can do it, a person kin to them—and they have, in their choice of attitude and presentation, a comment on the story. I use this too; it is one of the tricks in the box. And it is moving, right up close to a religious experience—a community experience with real roots in it—when stories have this kind of reality for the players and the audience. The experience is removed from behind a fourth wall. And, in Colquitt, it would not be possible without the use of direct address.

There is a ceremony that is part of each of the shows that acknowledges (names) the people the stories in the show are about or from. It does not say which story. It does say "So and so, I remember you," and it is no more than the list of remembered names followed by "Amazing Grace" laid in with one of Karen Kimbrel's amazing songs. There have been nights when members of the audience have added their own remembers to the list. It was a surprise the first time. Now, I hope for it. I want the experience to be so strong people are moved to participate.

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Another example occurred a year later, during the rehearsal of *Swamp Gravy.* Don Chandler came by to watch the run-through and give us the benefit of an outsider's eye four days before the opening. His observations were supportive and insightful and I, for one, was grateful for them. But, later that night, stage manager Lisa Davis received numerous complaining phone calls. Though Don was familiar to the participants of *Swamp Gravy: Sketches,* he was less well known to many in the *Swamp Gravy* cast, and they resented him as an outsider. Cast members were dispirited, angry, or fearful as a result of Don's comments. My decision to have Don deliver his critiques directly to the cast rather than through me seemed to have done more harm than good. The next day, when Lisa told me the news, I turned to Charlotte Phillips for help.

Charlotte played her own grandmother in a pivotal scene from the Spring 1994 production. She is a spiritual anchor for the group. This creative, caring, self-effacing woman had a ready answer. People, she said, felt hurt. They

8. Charlotte Phillips in "Carmen Miranda Hat," a scene from Swamp Gravy: The Gospel Truth, *Spring 1995: "If she kept her head tilted right, the little husband could also sit under the hat" (Carson 1995). (Photo by Richard Owen Geer)*

didn't feel supported. They were not, she said, in touch. "We barely know each other," Charlotte told me. "To get in touch, we need to touch." I asked her to create an exercise for the evening's rehearsal.

That night, instead of vocal warmups, people chatted as Charlotte laid out food and drink. "First feed, then comfort," she whispered to me. After the cast ate the sandwiches, Charlotte invited them into a circle. The "circle" meandered around platforms and staircases making a ring of hands inside the set. Charlotte pulled two handwritten pages from her pocket. I stiffened in anticipation of a time-wasting speech.

Her letter talked of love and mutual appreciation. After it, many were in tears. Charlotte asked us to hug, and tell what we meant to each other. The hugging took time, but people were as hungry to touch physically and emotionally as they had been for the chips and sandwiches. Outside of scene

work, I had shied away from asking for physical intimacy. But Charlotte, an insider, recognized the moment of ripeness. It was right, too, that, as an insider, she invited the intimacy. I got a great fatherly hug from Spud, a tearful press from Chris (one of our few high school boys), a tender embrace from ten-year-old Heather (one of our keenest performers and a child with mental retardation), and a bear hug from Veronica whose two sons were the only African American males in the play at the time.

The group found a way to process the necessary and painful critique. Several dozen cast members contributed, and people like Lisa and Charlotte were instrumental, but the group did the work.

I've learned to trust the group mind not only to avert catastrophes, but to imagine and perform innovations and take pleasure in the process.[5] The *Swamp Gravy* cast, for instance, takes pleasure in performing racial integration. Racial integration came south at the point of a gun; no one likes to be forced by outsiders, and there is still resentment among whites and blacks. In the 1994 version, in a scene called, "Brown Dress," an educated woman confesses to the murder of her abuser husband. Some of the scene's power comes from the fact that the woman is played simultaneously by two women, white and black. Doubling the woman's role universalizes its meaning, which comes to be about the solidarity of women in the face of male abuse. The scene, which has nothing to do with race, is breathtaking in its erasure of racial boundaries. The scene contributes to the collapse of negative stereotypes about rural southern towns. The cast knows this and takes pleasure in it.

Over time, the town's more painful history will, I think, be performed. The pleasures of "Brown Dress" will suggest other pleasures; if integrating diversity is pleasing, then integrating more diversity will be more pleasing. Evidence for this happening is to be found in the 1995 version of Swamp Gravy. *The Gospel Truth* contains an emotionally taxing scene in which 13 women and girls recite a story of sexual abuse that lasted years and entangled several children in a web, at least partially, of their own devising. To my amazement, the cast voted unanimously to include this difficult scene. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's explanation of "flow" (1975) may account for the cast's audacity. Csikszentmihalyi states that an organism, having once experienced flow, will do what it can to remain in that state. Swamp Gravy, as a pleasure-seeking organism, may be striving to remain in the newfound flow of community performance through an ever-shifting balance between celebration and self-critique.

While the community-as-organism is a consideration, so, too, are the individuals. They create the performances out of which the play is built. I try to help community members discover the performance power they already possess. Jakie, one of the strongest players, is a white, 40-something clerk in a manufacturing company. In *Swamp Gravy* she and Gayle told the tale of humiliation and justifiable murder in "Brown Dress." Jakie, who had never before acted, was excellent in her demanding role.

"I'm a very emotional person," Jakie says, "I wear my feelings on my sleeve." Jakie has a strong voice, lively face, and communicates with her whole body. Jakie came to Swamp Gravy already prepared: "We don't have to learn the dialect," Charlotte told a reporter (Spaid 1995), and Jakie, like Charlotte, is of the culture and patois, vocally and physically interesting, and emotionally connected to the subject of abuse, having helped a friend through an abusive relationship. With a good text and a sensitive and authentic person like Jakie, I usually find myself with little to do but facilitate staging, encourage, ask good questions, and coach technique. Diction, projection, blocking, stage deportment, and the playing of laughs are the things I stress most often. I don't alter a performer's natural diction unless it is incomprehensible to other native speakers. I yell "louder" more often than anything else, and remind

from the "Brown Dress" scene of *Swamp Gravy*

Edith McDuffie's story adapted by Jo Carson

WOMAN 2 (a white woman): And I don't know why it was this day and not some other, but I said to myself "enough is enough"

WOMAN 1 (a black woman): Enough is enough. I didn't see his coat, I figured he still had the .38 in his pocket,

WOMAN 2: I figured.

WOMAN 1: and I thought I might die but I've thought that before and I didn't. I walked into our room

WOMAN 2: I figured.

WOMAN 1: and pointed the shotgun at him and told him to

WOMAN 2: quit!

WOMAN 1: or I'd shoot him,

WOMAN 2: and he came after me.

WOMAN 1: He felt his pockets for the gun,

WOMAN 2: *(Repeats)* for the gun

WOMAN 1: and I ran into the yard, I was yelling for help when he came out the door...

WOMAN 2: *(Softly, intensely, as fast as possible)* I don't care if you don't write down about the brown dress, but write this down. He beat us, all of us. His sisters saw that too, but they didn't worry about that. They were here, both of them, the nights all three of my children were born, and they'd look at those babies when they came out of my body and try to decide whether or not they looked like him. They were his, all of them. He beat me the night the third one was born because they didn't think she looked like him. And he beat her. Not that night, but as she grew. She's nine years old and she has scars all over her back.

WOMAN 1: *(As this is being spoken, precisely and very slowly)* And he had his coat in his hand and he was reaching for the gun in the pocket of it, and I pointed the shotgun at him and pulled the trigger

BOTH: and he fell on the porch and died.

WOMAN 1: I killed him.

WOMAN 2: There are the words you're looking for. Write them down.

WOMAN 1: Read me what you've written.

WOMAN 2: I am an English teacher.

MAN (a police officer): Brown dress.

WOMAN 1: Cross out brown dress.

WOMAN 2: It is not a complete sentence.

MAN: Suspect states victim beat her and the children. Suspect states another beating of youngest child was in process. Suspect states she had reason to believe victim was armed. Suspect states she tried to halt beating. Suspect states she shot victim in self-defense.

WOMAN 1: And that's it?

WOMAN 2: That's all you wrote of what I told you?

MAN: That's what I need.

BOTH: *(They turn to each other)* It is not the story.

(Lights fade on policeman.)

WOMAN 1: I am not proud of this story,

BOTH: *(The women move slowly together)* not proud

WOMAN 2: of what I did,

WOMAN 1: I did,

WOMAN 2: but I would do it again tomorrow if I had to,

WOMAN 1: and my regret,

WOMAN 2: if I have one, *(she turns to the other woman)* is

BOTH: that I did not do it sooner. (Carson et al. 1994)

9. Left to right: Ferrell Keaton, Jakie Draper, and Gayle Grimsley in "Brown Dress," a scene from Swamp Gravy, *Fall 1994. (Photo by Glenn Bair)*
GRIMSLEY: and I pointed the shotgun at him and pulled the trigger
BOTH WOMEN: and he fell on the porch and died.

people to pick up cues. Jakie wanted to act the role, but was "scared to death," she told me. "Lack of self-esteem is real strong in me." Her belief in my theater expertise helped alleviate her fears, she told me, but I won her trust by believing in her, by finding the good and praising it. Work with community performers has taught me that someone like Jakie, without experience or confidence, but with sensitivity and a good instrument, can excel.

Community performers have advantages that traditionally trained actors don't. Theaters and drama schools are breeding grounds for "thespiagenic disease"—actors catch actor behavior from their teachers and fellow students. Community performers, by contrast, look and act like ordinary folks, and, as a bonus, they come in all ages, body types, classes, and colors and look and act like people.

While community performers may not know what *is* possible in performance—which is a drawback—they don't know what *isn't* possible—which is an advantage. For example, the first runthrough of *Swamp Gravy* (three weeks before the opening of the 1994 spring season) was a rocky event; performers had all they could do to just get through the lineup of scenes. But at the next run-through, the pattern changed. Individual performances took shape, and large group scenes (with dozens of voices) developed momentum and excitement. This was accomplished because the cast members unabashedly copied one another. Performance values escalated as performers leapfrogged over one another—breaking, setting, and breaking new performance standards.

On the other hand, the time, effort, and discipline demanded if a performance is to be authoritative is something not every community performer comprehends. There is a proclivity to rest on past accomplishments. Not every mind is possessed of Tyrone Guthrie's "image of magnificence." Pep talks are needed. As the reputation of Swamp Gravy increases, I find myself giving more of them.

For an outside director, learning the local mores is a task comparable to mastering the region's dialect. No one ever questioned my theater knowledge to my face, but what did get questioned, and often, was my ability to direct in a manner appropriate to the people of Miller County. One of numerous slips

10. Clockwise from left: Ashley Holt, Debbie Sloan, Gayle Grimsley, Iva Tabb, Jakie Draper, Veronica Haire, Brenda Howell in "Covet," a recollection of childhood sexual abuse, from Swamp Gravy: The Gospel Truth, *Spring 1995. (Photo by Richard Owen Geer)*

11. Left to right: Billy Kimbrel, and (seated) Sheila Chandler, Karen Kimbrel, Annette Miller, Veronica Haire; (standing) Debbie Sloan, Jamaica Eady, Gayle Grimsley, and Doris Wilson in "Cotton," from Swamp Gravy, *Fall 1994: "We use cotton, I mean USE it. What else can you wear, eat, and stand on at the same time?" (Carson 1994). (Photo by Glenn Bair)*

occurred with the young man who acted the man/horse in a scene called "Secret Marriage."

Jay Worsley is a talented, self-trained performer. He has what he calls a "double-jointed voice box" that allows him to imitate voices and sounds. I envisioned his character as horselike, whinnying, prancing, and pawing the ground while maintaining the upper-body posture of a proud young person. The role would be, I was sure, a tour de force for this handsome young man and an opportunity to show more facets of his performing skill. After demonstrating, I asked him what he thought of my staging ideas. "You may not want to hear what I think," he said. Something had misfired, but I didn't know what. He wouldn't say what he disliked. Gradually I realized it had to do with the fear of appearing both strange and something less than masculine.

A year previously I wouldn't have handled my predicament as well. In the intervening months I had learned to read the stiff-necked smiling silence that betokens trouble. It crossed my mind that if I didn't handle this situation carefully I would lose Jay. Asking him to perform those movements had shaken his trust in me. I kept up my nervous chat as I probed. He had no problem, he told me, doing the sound effects so long as he didn't have to physicalize the horse. I assured him he wouldn't have to, promised a complete reworking of the scene, and, frustrated, adjourned rehearsal. Karen snagged my sleeve and pulled me aside, "Miller County men don't prance like horses," she said.

I was annoyed at having to toss out a charming and funny staging. "Save it for the Chicago version," Karen said. This was a way of ribbing me (I live in Chicago) about cultural inappropriateness. I couldn't think of a way of doing the scene that I liked as well, so I asked the cast for help. At the next rehearsal we began to play together, and soon came up with something that pleased us all and which has proven popular with audiences, too.

Out of Control in Colquitt

Unlearning Dominance and Reflexivity

The episode with Jay occurred relatively recently, the matter of community codes and values versus my artistic vision had, as I mentioned, arisen much earlier. The problem stemmed from something I didn't know about myself: I was a domineering, narcissistic theater artist. Colquitt was willing to retrain me.

"You don't listen very well," Tammy Spooner told me. "The play needs to seem really familiar, as opposed to people wondering what's going on." Tammy described two types of citizens: those who went away to school and returned, and those who lived every day of their lives in Colquitt. The first group, she said, has perspective. The others think that Colquitt is the center of the universe. These native people, she went on, know only one way, and if the play, doesn't make sense to them, it's senseless. "It would be better that the production be boring with actors standing onstage reading stories, than 'interesting' but something that the people don't get," she said.

I promised Tammy that the community's images, words, and values would become the medium of my artistic expression. But I hadn't really heard what she was saying.

A few weeks later, over a related issue, the storm broke. "I have blown it," I journalled:

> I have offended everybody. I got so frustrated about [actors coming late to] rehearsal that I swore at the top of my lungs. I tried to go on, but to my horror and amazement people were walking out of the room. I immediately apologized, but I had punched a hole in the boat. People wouldn't talk, wouldn't meet my eye. I apologized to one after another and tried to explain that in my world people often swear. Charlotte said that more offensive than swearing was the fact that I lost my temper. Apparently, people do not display anger. I had no idea. I meant nothing by it. It slipped out. For a moment I forgot the culture. My outbreak had, I am sure, a performed component. Unfortunately, in the instant of anger I didn't think about consequences. This is a nightmare. I am sick with it.
>
> Since this last entry, two hours have passed. Harold Burrell, the Baptist minister, has come to see me, said he is my friend and will stand with me. Joy Jinks told me she loves me and doesn't understand what has happened. More must have been at issue than just losing my temper. Don Chandler told me that the only way the project could be salvaged was if I got on a plane and went home. He would not speak to me and wanted to hit me for swearing in front of women and children. Tammy Spooner said I was just doing what I've been doing since I got here: pushing ideas that I wanted regardless of what other people said. Karen said that if Billy had been there, or, Kay said, if her daddy had been there, they would have "whupped" me.
>
> I vented like an angry director. I admit that some, maybe most, of my choice was a performative one, unconsciously, that is. I chose to "put the fear of God in them." Well, among these God-fearing people, that backfired royally. I was sure that by the time the minister visited me, everyone related to the project had heard. Harold made me feel better, he told me the story of Peter who said, "to Hell with the Lord," and then was forgiven. Harold put his arms around me and Joy and prayed, he said "Father, I know you don't approve of the words that Richard used, but I know that you forgive him. He is repentant."

The important rules in a community are not written, cannot even be spoken. They are discovered through sensitivity and transgression. The child is

12. Richard Owen Geer (lower right) with the cast of Fall 1994. (Photo by Glenn Bair)

free to learn by rule-breaking, the adult is not. I was a dangerous man-child that the community was no longer sure it could afford to train.

What I did was wrong, I see that now. My work preached noncoercion, subversion of hegemony, and empowerment. Contradicting these tenets, I had intimidated in order to control. I had applied the bromides of traditional theater—autocracy, punctuality, aesthetic versus humanistic values—but my efforts had backfired. Tammy was right.

Could another kind of theater practice better meet the needs of the community? If people didn't show up to rehearse, for instance, could it be worked around? In that moment I began to question the assumptions by which I produced theater.

After much discussion, a special meeting was called, and I was allowed to apologize to the cast and families. Then I stepped outside while they put my fate to a vote. Annette Miller, an African American woman who had argued for Christian forgiveness, moved that I be retained, and Don Chandler, who had wanted me gone, seconded; the vote was unanimous.

I changed. The efficacy I sought for others I found for myself.

From my altered perspective, one thing continued to disturb me: by professional and academic theater standards, I had done nothing remarkable. How far from humane my life in art had been. It took the people of Colquitt to show me that American theater is held together by desire and oppression.[6] In Colquitt, these coercions are largely absent. Anyone can be in the play; as the director and producer, I need them as much as they need me.

The swearing incident was one in a series of episodes about my inability to see past my own reflection. If I am an example, the American theater artist's battle to decenter the self is a long and difficult one. I'm appalled by the degree of my artistic chauvinism. In 25 years I never really learned to attend, to inhabit, to perform the Other. Wallace Bacon writes: "You cannot know

yourself by yourself. You are you because you are not the other, but you can find yourself only by going out from yourself" (1976:139–40). In a recent national meeting of dramaturgs at which Swamp Gravy was featured, cast member Ferrell Keaton told the assembly, "Being in Swamp Gravy has shown me that if I look deep enough inside you I will find me, and if I look deep enough inside me I will find you."

Working with community members in the creation of indigenous performance finally involved me with the thing I had sought for so long: an authentic experience where I could lose myself in service to a necessary theater.

Although I have eschewed the guru role and talk instead of service, am I not *really* the one setting the agenda? Am I not able, through my performance knowledge, to control while maintaining the appearance of serving? Possibly, on a single occasion, but Swamp Gravy is not a single occasion. It is an ongoing process in which the results of yesterday's decisions create the climate in which today's work is done. If I were manipulating the community in a direction it did not want to go, I would hear from them—and I have. Dialog has convinced me to make innumerable midcourse corrections, some easy, some hard.

The trickster, an archetypal representation, exists within a field of potentialities similar to those surrounding the outsider performance worker. The trickster can invert meanings, bend rules, test boundaries, and rupture categories. The question for a performance worker is how best to use these powers. When the worker localizes these signs exclusively in the self, he or she breaks local conventions and alerts the community, which quickly ejects the interloper. For this reason players have been marginalized in cultures around the

13. Left to right: Tiffany Thompson, Lucas Davis, Emanuel Haire, Erin East, Lesley Davis, Ansley Davis, Garrett Richardson, Darrius Haire, David Fudge, Billy Kimbrel, and Chris Gaskins in "School," a scene from Swamp Gravy, *Fall 1994. (Photo by Glenn Bair)*

world, and this, says Stanley Diamond, is why Plato ejected poets from *The Republic* (1974:190). This almost happened to me in Colquitt.

On the other hand, when the performance worker operates through the participants, the outcome is different; a barter is created. The participants receive the subversive and empowering signs via the trickster and are able to change their community. The trickster receives codes from the community that enable him or her to be protected and secure. The exchange benefits both parties. When the attributes of the trickster are localized in the performance worker, they are easy to find and discard—end of project. When, on the other hand, the performance worker transplants these signs in the participants, they flourish, are difficult to dislodge, appropriate in scope, and effective in creating change.

Pedro Sandor, Chilean filmmaker, anthropologist, and community practitioner explained it to me in a parable:

> Once there was famine in a village and the people were starving. A wiseman arrived and told them that their sacred melons, which grew abundantly, must be eaten to stave off starvation. Reluctantly the people ate the melons. Afterwards, in times of plenty, they made the wiseman king. Then they began to think about having eaten their sacred melons. They grew ashamed and angry. They seized the king and killed him. Years later another famine raged. A second wiseman came. He saw the watermelons and the starving people and said nothing; instead he hinted. Partly because of these hints, the town decided to eat the melons and was saved. When the good times returned they did not make this man king, but neither did they kill him. (1992)

The first performance worker retained control of the codes of performance; the second followed Boal's advice and transferred to the people the means of the production (1979:ix–x). The first performance worker died, the second lived to work again. "You are making a dirty trick with the Gravy Soup," Pedro told me (Geer 1993). Specifically, Swamp Gravy lures people into what appears to be a conservative process—the celebration of heritage—which is, in fact, a subversive and liberalizing process that exposes people to one another and to themselves. This manipulative act—no matter how useful—would be morally reprehensible were it not for the fact that, once engaged in the process, the community itself decides the contents of Swamp Gravy's programs and the rate of community change.

"It isn't about theater," said lighting designer Brackley Frayer on the opening night of the first play. "It's about something else. It takes some getting used to." It's anthropology, theater, drama therapy, and missionary work, I thought. It's not about the play, it's about the stories; it's not about the acting, it's about the communal agon. Lee Roloff, emeritus professor at Northwestern, talked about "light on" and "light through." Theater can be something you put light on and look at, or it can be something through which you look to the light beyond.

As the Swamp Gravy project progressed, the things I had been saying to the community began coming true: individuals *were* empowered, the community *did* feel bonded, there *was* a palpable pride that connected residents. Terry Toole, publisher of the local paper and always a tough critic, summed up in this way:

> Colquitt might not be growing in population, but the quality of living and the quality of the people have made giant steps in showing the rest of the world how to get along with each other. We are not perfect, but

We sit in judgment, we stand in appreciation; it's as simple as that. In England, Ann Jellicoe's audiences and performers stood and mingled and felt themselves to be participants. Audiences stand in Colquitt, too. A woman walked up to Karen when she and I were visiting Albany, a town about an hour from Colquitt. "When are y'all doing Swamp Gravy *again?" she asked. Karen told her that we would be doing it there in Albany in a month. "But that's in the municipal auditorium, isn't it? There won't be any mingling, will there?" Karen admitted that the Albany show would be on a proscenium stage with a seated audience. "When you doin' it again in Colquitt?" she persisted. I spoke up at that point to ask why she liked mingling. "'Cause you can never tell when the person next to you is gonna start to sing."*

14. Veronica Haire (on platform), cast, and audience in "Storytelling Song," from Swamp Gravy, *Fall 1994: "And my grandma was hell on wheels" (Carson 1994). This scene is now used in every Swamp Gravy production. (Photo by Glenn Bair)*

> we are light years ahead of most of the areas of this nation that I have visited. If you are in need, there is no better place on earth to be than Colquitt. (1995)

The project was conceived as a tool for cultural and economic revitalization. After the opening of *Swamp Gravy: Sketches*, Geneva told me that "the original intention to bring money into the community has not been realized." But, on the opening night of *Swamp Gravy*, Pirate's Cove Restaurant served a record-breaking crowd. Several merchants told Karen that on Hometown Holiday, the last day of the fall 1995 season, they experienced their highest sales ever. Each season thousands of visitors arrive in the town of 2,000 to buy their dinners, rent their pillows, and spend their dollars in the stores around the square. The economic impact is being felt, and the future promises more. As a part of the Cultural Olympiad, Swamp Gravy will be promoted in 20 million brochures circulated worldwide.

As the process is replicated in other communities (projects are presently underway in five states) Miller County's pride deepens. Swamp Gravy affirms that Miller County's contribution is valued by the larger culture.

Much is happening in Colquitt. The company performs two seasons a year and has a heavy touring schedule. Cotton Hall is undergoing extensive improvements to preserve the character of the old dirt-floored warehouse yet enable year-round performances. These days in Colquitt I feel accepted, not me the artist/scholar/outsider, but *me*. The name Geer is not common, so you can imagine my surprise one day when I came upon a street of that name. In Colquitt, though I may never live there, I have found community. That sign, honoring someone else, seemed to confirm it.

Notes

1. It is *TDR* style to spell "theatre" with -re, but since it is the author's opinion that the anglophilic and francophilic spelling is elitist and eurocentric, the spelling is "theater" throughout.
2. All quotes, unless otherwise cited, are from conversations between June 1991 and July 1995 with Swamp Gravy audience members and citizens of Miller County, Georgia.
3. I am indebted to Debra Calhoun Jones for her thoughtful editing of this manuscript. Thanks also to Gayle Grimsley, Karen Kimbrel, and Joy Jinks for their guidance.
4. Not her real name. The identities of informants are disguised while the public comments of participants are attributed. In some cases these are the same people.
5. In Chicago I facilitate two community performance projects in the culturally diverse Edgewater-Uptown neighborhood where I live. SOUL: Stories of Urban Life is a youth-led, multigenerational, multicultural performance group hosted by the Chicago Park District; the Scrap Mettle company is comprised of residents, staff, and neighbors of Lakefront SRO (single room occupancy), a provider of housing and social services to the previously homeless. Moving the Swamp Gravy model from a small rural town to a huge urban neighborhood increases the complexity of the system exponentially. Urban problems won't be solved with the first "round" of community performance. Like researchers in artificial intelligence, I hope instead we can create a relatively simple, self-sustaining system that can be implanted and allowed to evolve. Such an "organism" would receive nourishment (resources) if it rewarded the community. If it were inclusionary and autotelic—if the community organism yielded pleasurable, meaningful experience to whomever wanted to join in—it might evolve. Rather than being a competitive struggle for survival in an arena of scarce resources, its evolution would be cooperative. Participants would give and receive pleasure—identity, empowerment, security, love—in a complex cultural ecology. Being wildly utopian, what could evolve is a conscious city, a metahuman intelligence comprising a community of minds.
6. Ironically, I had to come to Colquitt—where virtually no theater traditions existed—to experience theater free from this Saturnian gravity. The flow experience of ensemble and individual performance provides Swamp Gravy with the attractive force it possesses. Weaker gravity in the field of community performance allows people and ideas to move in and out. This helps insure that the stories are fresh and performances responsive to shifts in the larger field of community.

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